

STORY BY STAFF SGT. J. PAUL CROXON ✪ PHOTOS BY LANCE CHEUNG

# TAKING THE PUNCH

If Airman magazine were a reality TV show, the view behind the set would show the Airman team brainstorming ideas for the next social media post. Things always sound better in the planning stages of these unofficial sessions. Ideas like “let’s eat whale blubber” or “let’s get zapped by the laser” sound like legitimate crowd pleasers. Then there’s the time I thought it would be funny to film me getting punched by a Mixed Martial Arts fighter. Things don’t always turn out the way we expect, because even female MMA fighters don’t hit like girls.

Our team was sent to cover Airmen training to be MMA fighters in Rapid City, S.D. We covered two fighters, Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson and 1st Lt. Jason Carter. We visited their dojo to see them train and that’s when we got the idea for one of us to get beat up. It was my turn to be on the Web.

I’m not a fighter. I don’t know how to make another man submit with a rear naked chokehold. I do know that when you have the choice of taking a punch from a 115-pound woman or a 215-pound man, you do the math and take the punch from the woman. I was wrong.

My interviews with the fighters should have tipped me off. When I asked Sergeant Nelson why she wanted to be a

fighter and why she chose to be a cop, she said she just wanted to hurt people. What I thought was bravado was actually her honest answer. This woman has a fighter inside that wanted to get into the ring and make people hurt.

Lieutenant Carter, on the other hand, was a little different. He still wanted to win and he trains hard for it. But for him, MMA is a challenge, a way of testing his strength, a hobby. He doesn’t want to go pro whereas Sergeant Nelson dreams about it.

At the dojo, during the planning phase of “operation get punched in the head,” I quickly eliminated the huge dude in favor of the petite woman. Mistake number one.

The plan was for me to do an intro for the camera and then take a hit. I explained it to Sergeant Nelson before we started.

“When we’re on assignment, we try to find ways of plugging the story for social media,” I said.

“OK.”

“So, for this one, I’m going to need you to punch me in the face,” I said. Mistake number two.

“Oh, heck yeah,” she said with a little too much enthusiasm.

“This is just for the video,” I said. “You don’t have to hit me as hard as you can. Just enough to look real.”

“Whatever,” was the reply.

How do I explain what it was like to get hit by Sergeant Nelson? The strike was a lot like the fighter: small, compact, the equivalent of replacing a tennis racket with a hammer. And it hurt. It hurt a lot. It made the edges of my vision go dark and come back in time to catch a punch in the stomach. I didn’t know MMA fighters train to do combinations almost constantly. Mistake number three.

Now, it’s been said that I took the punch poorly because my momma wasn’t hard enough on me or because I wrote poetry in high school. The truth is, Sergeant Nelson is a well-trained MMA fighter and I’m a writer. I never had a chance.

That’s the best part about writing for Airman magazine. I get to meet Airmen who are doing so much more in and out of uniform. They’re fighters, artists or students studying to be doctors. If there’s one thing I’ve learned during my time at the magazine, it’s that Airmen throughout the total force have amazing stories to tell.

Another thing I’ve learned is not to take a punch from an MMA fighter who clearly doesn’t know the meaning of taking it easy.

*James G.*

photo by Lance Cheung



**Staff Sgts. Rachel Nelson** and J. Paul Croxon inside a step-van prior to an outdoor environmental portrait at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D.

**Staff Sgt. J. Paul Croxon** uses his phone to take a snapshot of 1st Lt. Jason Carter, blue gloves, a readiness flight commander and mixed-martial arts fighter, at Dynamic Martial Arts in Rapid City, S.D. The photo was posted on Airman magazine social media sites.